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Fractured lives, newfound freedoms? The dialectics of religious seekership among Chinese migrants in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the negotiations involved in the process of Chinese migrants converting to Christianity in Singapore. For many Chinese people, migration involves being exposed to religion for the first time, and for some, it involves them converting to Christianity. In Singapore, the conversion of Chinese migrants to Christianity occurs in a context of "shared" Chinese ethnicity, which can provide both bridges and barriers to the formation of Chinese Christian identities and communities. This "shared" ethnicity causes many Christian groups in Singapore to target Chinese migrants in their evangelisation efforts, which can result in migrant and non-migrant Chinese communities being formed and fractured through religion. Drawing on qualitative data, we use four dialectical pairings – freedom and control, giving and receiving, questioning and authority, community and identity – to understand the negotiations and compromises involved in the conversion of Chinese migrants to Christianity. Through these understandings, we show how conversion often involves reconciling different mindsets, practices and expectations in the transition to Christianity for Chinese migrants in Singapore.

KEYWORDS Migration; conversion; Christianity; Singapore; China; community

Introduction

More than two decades have passed since Fenggang Yang's (1998, p. 238) call for more research into the "growing phenomenon" of conversion to Christianity among the peoples of"non-Christian Asia". Since then, scholars have responded to this call by developing new theoretical and empirical understandings of Chinese conversion to Christianity. These understandings separate into two distinct strands of research. The first explores conversion inside China, and how Christian groups and individuals attempt to overcome the restrictive socio-political context in which they operate (e.g. Aikman, 2003; Bays, 2003; Yang, 2005; 2006; Yang & Tamney, 2006). The second explores conversion outside China, and how migration can bring about an embrace of religion among those who come from ostensibly non-religious backgrounds (e.g. Chao, 2006; Kalir, 2009). This second strand is defined by its empirical focus on Chinese migrant communities in the US (e.g. Wang & Yang, 2006; Yang, 1998; 1999; see also Cadge, Levitt, & Smilde, 2011; Carnes & Yang, 2004; Yang & Ebaugh, 2001), and, in particular, the conversion of Chinese youths and students therein (e.g. Cao, 2005; Hall, 2006; Yang, Hu, & Yang, 2018). As a result of these developments, the US–China axis has come to dominate the discourse. However, given that being "Chinese" and being "Christian" remain two mutually distinct categories of identity and belonging for many (see Lu & Gao, 2018), there remains an ongoing need to better understand the negotiations and compromises involved in bringing these categories together through the process of religious seekership and, ultimately, conversion. With this in mind, this article addresses recent calls for research to consider "religious phenomena beyond U.S. borders" (Cadge, Levitt, & Smilde, 2011, p. 439) that are contributing to the rapid expansion of Christianity in non-Western societies. In doing so, it also builds on Yang's (2005, p. 424; see also Yang, 1998) critique that understandings of Chinese conversion to Christianity "pay little or no attention to the larger social and cultural contexts within which . . . individuals change their religion". Indeed, while the

developments outlined above provide substantial redress to this critique, the discourse is skewed towards the hegemonic socio-cultural contexts of China and the US. We say "hegemonic" in view of the fact that the socio-cultural context of China is defined by severe restrictions on religious praxis, and, as a result, a population that is mostly nonreligious (or practises various forms of Chinese folk religion). Conversely, the US is defined by a plurality of mostly non-Chinese ethnic groups, freedom of religion, and a majority Christian population. If we are to more fully understand the processes of bringing "Chinese" and "Christian" identities together, we need to do so in contexts where differences are less pronounced, and where conversion is less likely to be influenced by the stigma of rejecting (in the case of China) or embracing (in the case of the US) dominant socio-cultural narratives. To the extent that religious conversion is a process of negotiating new ways of being in the world (Woods, 2012), research needs to identify and offer better understandings of how these negotiations implicate the individual convert, and the various communities to which they belong. Singapore is an appropriate context in which such an understanding can be forged. At 18.8 per cent of the population, Christianity is the second-largest religious group in Singapore, and has majority representation by Chinese Singaporeans (SingStat, 2015). Moreover, with Chinese Singaporeans comprising 74.3 per cent of the resident population (SingStat, 2017), Singapore is "the only nation outside Greater China with a majority Chinese population", making it a "unique testing ground for theories of shared ethnicity in a Chinese perspective" (Liu, 2014, p. 1225). Given such a "shared ethnicity", it is necessary to differentiate Chinese migrants (individuals who have been born and raised in China, and have typically had limited exposure to religion) and Chinese Singaporeans (an "overseas Chinese" population).1 The problems that stem from such a "shared ethnicity" have become more pronounced in recent decades, since Singapore started to undergo a period of destabilising demographic transition. The twin forces of an ageing society and declining fertility rates have underpinned a growing dependence on migrants, especially from countries that share Singapore's ethno-linguistic heritage, to provide key skills and services. This has resulted in a "diversity of ethnicities and culture never before seen" (Gomes & Tan, 2015, p. 217), and has caused identity politics and the integration of communities to become issues of foremost socio-political concern. This is particularly true for Chinese migrants, who are ethnically similar to, but culturally different from, their Chinese Singaporean counterparts.2 As such, the growing presence of Chinese migrants has served to:

> reconfigur[e] the line between intra-racial and inter-racial relations, so that national identity increasingly prevails over ethnic or sub-ethnic identity in the established [racial] groups. Between 1965 (when Singapore became independent) and 1990 (when large-scale immigration started), the "Chineseness" of most Chinese Singaporeans was partly shaped by intradiaspora linkages within the nation-state context . . . Since 1990 the differences among dialect and regional groups have blurred . . . old ethnic sub-divisions are giving way to an intra-diasporic division between Singaporeans and new migrants (Liu, 2014, p. 1231).

Liu describes here a process of Chinese Singaporean and Chinese migrant communities becoming increasingly divided over time, which has led to the formation of what Gomes (2017) calls "parallel societies". In light of these divisions, religions such as Christianity can play an important role in bridging differences. Yet, as much as Christianity provides another point of identification that can potentially unify Chinese communities in Singapore, so too can processes of religious seekership and conversion to Christianity reproduce differences in new, and potentially antagonistic, ways (Kong & Woods, 2019). It is therefore necessary to understand how religious seekership can lead to the formation and fracturing of Chinese communities, and, with it, a (re)negotiation of what it means to identify as both "Chinese" and "Christian" in Singapore. To highlight these negotiations, we have structured our empirical findings into four dialectical pairings, the aim being to highlight how the reasons for Chinese migrants to convert into Christianity may also, paradoxically, be the reasons for creating new inter-

and intra-community divisions. Not only that, but the dialectical pairing of findings also resonates with the use of Singapore as an empirical case, as it is at once "unique and universal" and can provide insight into "exploring comparatively the relationship between the national, the ethnic and the transnational" (Liu, 2014, p. 1235) in the formation of Chinese Christian identities and communities of belonging. The following sections provide, first, an overview of existing research into Chinese conversion to Christianity, and second, an empirical exploration of conversion among Chinese migrants in Singapore. The empirical section draws on a series of in-depth interviews conducted between October 2017 and June 2018 with Chinese Christian migrants in Singapore (26 interviews), Singaporean Christians (28 interviews; of which 27 were Chinese Singaporean, and one was Malay Singaporean) and Singapore-based Christian clergy (22 interviews). The data presented below are from a broader project that explores the role of Christianity in (dis)enabling migrants from different Asian countries to integrate into Singapore. Interviews were conducted in both English and Mandarin. Of the 26 Chinese Christian migrants we interviewed, three were already Christians before moving to Singapore, while 23 converted in Singapore.3 This suggests that migration – and the associated removal of socio-cultural restrictions on religious seekership, the desire for community belonging (especially in a context of "shared ethnicity"), and upward social mobility – are important factors that encourage Chinese conversion to Christianity, and are discussed in the empirical section below. While one Chinese migrant was a permanent resident of Singapore (because her China-born husband had converted to Singaporean citizenship), all the others were on fixed-term student or employment visas. In many respects, this reflects the fact that many of the Chinese migrants we interviewed had been living in Singapore for relatively short periods of time (most for less than five years; all for less than 10 years). All were born and raised in China; migrating to Singapore was the first time that any of them had lived outside China. While all the Chinese ASIAN STUDIES REVIEW 3 migrants we interviewed attended independent (i.e. non-denominational) churches, the Singaporean Christian and Singapore-based clergy cohorts were from a much broader range of churches spanning both mainline and non-denominational churches. For the purposes of this article, our sample of Chinese migrants cleaves into two distinct cohorts. The first comprises relatively young Chinese migrants in their 20s and 30s, who were either under- or post-graduate students, or working professionals. Our analysis of this cohort is based primarily on first-hand interviews with them, and, secondarily, on the views and experiences of Singaporean Christians and Singapore-based Christian clergy with these migrants. The second comprises Chinese migrants in their 20s to 40s, who were employed as manual labourers (for industries such as construction and engineering) on short, fixedterm contracts. These migrants are referred to as "migrant workers" in Singapore. We interviewed six Chinese migrant workers, with the analysis below mostly based on interviews with Christian clergy responsible for dedicated migrant-worker ministries.

Fractured Lives, Newfound Freedoms

Migration entails a break from the past; it is a process of disruption from which new ways of being can be realised. The challenge of migration is that it forces migrants to reassess their relationships, their loyalties and their own identities. Various forms of difference must be negotiated on a daily basis, the outcomes of which can cause migrants to feel closer to (and eventually become part of) some communities, and more distanced from others. Indeed, as much as migration can cause a fracturing of lives, so too can it enable the embrace of newfound freedoms. And as much as conversion to Christianity can be interpreted as a newfound freedom, so too can conversion lead to the creation of new fractures in the communities within which the migrant is already embedded (Woods, 2012; 2018a; Kong & Woods, 2018). With this in mind, this article aims to engage with the observation that "religion can mean a great deal to uprooted people" (Cao, 2005, p. 183), even those who do not at first identify as being "religious". These dynamics are certainly true among Chinese migrants. In China,

decades of Communist rule have led to the enactment of "heavy regulation against religion" (Yang, 2006, p. 96), which has led to the suppression of religious identification and the stigmatisation of religious conversion. For a long time, religion has therefore been depicted as detrimental to socio-political stability and progress. Such sentiment was most clearly demonstrated during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when religious sites were closed and various other attempts were made to cleanse China's socio-cultural landscape of religion (Ma, Woods, & Zhu, 2019). While religious tolerance was formally reinstated in 1982, the practice of religion remains severely restricted, as the government "proscribes proselytizing outside of approved religious premises, and directs that atheist propaganda must be carried out unremittingly, but not inside religious venues" (Yang, 2006, p. 101; see also Wang, 2017). Despite such concessions, religious groups remain highly regulated and often subject to "coercive and punitive state action" (Bays, 2003, p. 492); overt forms of religious identification continue to be frowned upon. While research has started to consider the influence of diasporic Chinese Christian communities in promoting religiously motivated "transnational activism" within China (e.g. Cheong & Poon, 2009; Lau, 2017; Wang, 2017), day-to-day restrictions on the practice of (and identification with) religion remain. Migrating out of such a context can bring about a break from the past, and in many instances a newfound freedom of choice when it comes to religious seekership. Below, we explore these dynamics in more detail; first, by considering existing work on the conversion of Chinese migrant communities to Christianity; and second, by exploring how conversion can lead to a negotiation of community and identity. The ideas raised in these sections pave the way for the empirical section that follows.

Chinese mobility and conversion to Christianity

The Chinese are unique in that, more so than for many other ethnic groups, migrating out of China is relatively more likely to bring about processes of religious conversion. In China, the stakes of conversion are high, whereas outside of China they are diminished. Accordingly, migration means that "without cultural traditions as barriers, the Chinese are now both free and bound to seek alternate meaning systems" (Yang, 1998, p. 251). The seeking and adoption of "alternative meaning systems" is reflected in recent estimates that put the number of Chinese Americans adopting a Christian identity at 25 to 30 per cent of the total community (Pew Research Center, 2013), versus just 5 per cent of the population of China (Pew Research Center, 2011). Accordingly, the broader "macrolevel" socio-cultural context in which an individual is located thus influences their "microlevel" individual (religious) choices, with conversion being explained as an outcome of moving between such contexts (Kane & Park, 2009). With this in mind, there have been calls to situate microlevel conversion networks within macrolevel contexts (Yang, 1998; 2005; see also Woods, 2012), and to explore "the interweaving of networks and culture" (Kane & Park, 2009, p. 370). This "interweaving" is important, as normative theories of conversion tend to privilege the roles of social networks and emotional ties in enabling a change in religious – and community – identification (Lofland & Stark, 1965). Thus, understandings of Chinese conversion have helped to expand the discourse by emphasising the role of (changing) contextual factors in enabling conversion processes. Among Chinese migrants, converting into religion often means converting to Christianity. This is for two overarching reasons. First, Christianity has often been associated with a particular form of Western modernity. It therefore appeals to well-educated and upwardly mobile Chinese (Hall, 2006; Yang, 2005) and those who seek "new value systems to replace the instability engendered by the abandonment of communist doctrine for market economies" (Cheong & Poon, 2009, p. 191; see also Aikman, 2003). In this sense, conversion to Christianity can be seen as a form of "cosmopolitan self-fashioning" (Martin, 2017, p. 706) that is an outcome of migration. Second, Christianity is a proselytising religion, with Christian groups being shown to specifically target Chinese communities. This is particularly true among communities of Chinese (and other international) students, who have been targeted by Christian

groups on the campuses of American universities (e.g. Ng, 2002; Yang, 1998; Zhang & Rentz, 1996). Strategies of outreach include informal social activities, lectures on Christianity and regular bible-study meetings. Combined, activities like these meet the practical, social and spiritual needs of students, and enable the development of community. Research such as this provides an indication of the extent to which Chinese conversion to Christianity in North America is often part of a broader process of cultural integration.

Forming Chinese Christian communities in the diaspora

Migration and religious conversion are similar insofar as both processes bring about a negotiation of new forms of identification, and new forms of community. Conversion thus "parallel[s] the migrant's experience in leaving her homeland and coming to a new place to begin a new life" (Akcapar, 2006, p. 844). While both processes are inherently contested – as they involve disruption and change – conversion can be more culturally problematic. Migrants leave China, but they also leave behind families and communities to which they remain attached – in various ways, and to varying degrees. The saying "one more Christian, one less Chinese" encapsulates the stigma traditionally associated with conversion, the idea being that being Chinese and being Christian are incompatible, and that converting into Christianity means converting out of the Chinese identity (Lu & Gao, 2018; Yang, 1999; Yang & Ebaugh, 2001). To mitigate against such associations, Chinese Christians in both China and diasporic communities around the world have sought to "Sinicise" Christianity, the aim being to "demonstrate to prospective Chinese converts that becoming Christian does not mean becoming non-Chinese" (Yang & Ebaugh, 2001, p. 369). This dynamic is more nuanced in Singapore, as there is less stigma attached to being both "Chinese" and "Christian". As a result, conversion to Christianity can bring the Chinese Singaporean and Chinese migrant communities closer together, which can, paradoxically, cause ethno-cultural differences to be amplified (Gomes & Tan, 2015; Kong & Woods, 2019). Indeed, in light of the politicisation of Chinese identity in Singapore outlined above, conversion to Christianity can be seen as both a bridge and a barrier to inter- and intra-community belonging. That said, the notion of enculturating Christianity within Chinese diasporic communities around the world has provided a focus of research in recent years. For example, Kalir (2009, p. 131) has shown how conversion to Christianity among transient Chinese migrant workers in Israel enables a temporary form of integration into the host society, with Christian communities providing "spiritual relief, a social network, a feeling of belonging, and some practical aid". Beyond integration, the services provided by Christian groups also provided a form of social and cultural capital that served to elevate migrants' status when they returned to China. In a similar vein, Cao (2005, p. 183) shows how the church acts as a "nurturing surrogate family" to Chinese youths from immigrant families in the US. Continuing to develop this diasporic perspective, Ley (2008; see also Yang, 1998) has shown how Chinese and Korean migrant churches in Vancouver, Canada, act as "urban service hubs" wherein various types of social capital are formed, and personal and social services provided. Such formations and provision serve to strengthen the Chinese and Korean ethnic communities, simultaneously embedding them in a foreign country, while isolating them from broader (non-Chinese) Canadian society. While the preceding examples provide an indication of the extent to which the theoretical value of studying Chinese conversion to Christianity is "beyond doubt" (Yang, 1998, p. 238), they are nonetheless limited by their empirical narrowness. Research to date is overwhelmingly located in contexts where Christianity is the dominant (or a derivative of the dominant, in the case of Israel) religion in society. As such, it reflects the normative viewpoint that"adopting the majority's religion while retaining certain previous ethnic elements is often a natural consequence of the immigrants making sense and 'making boundaries' of their identities" (Yang, Hu, & Yang, 2018, p. 3; see also Carnes & Yang, 2004). Yet, while these attempts at integration make sense in such predominantly Christian contexts, they are more nuanced in Singapore. The dominance of the Chinese Singaporean population means that most

churches can adapt (linguistically at least) to the needs of Chinese migrants, meaning different "types" of Chinese Christian coexist within the same organisational structure. Proximity can cause differences between Chinese communities to be acutely felt (Gomes & Tan, 2015; Kong &Woods, 2019), a dynamic that Ley (2008, p. 2060) explains in the Canadian context as "internal ethnic diversity [which] introduces centrifugal forces challenging unity". This dialectic of inter-Chinese Christian community formation and fracturing can reproduce more fundamental divisions within Singapore's Chinese community, and is considered in detail below.

The Dialectics of Religious Seekership among Chinese Migrants in Singapore

While Chinese migrants in Singapore come from all walks of life, our interviews were, as mentioned above, focussed on two discrete groups. The first relates to those who are (relatively) young, well-educated and upwardly mobile (Ng, 2002); the second relates to those who provide manual labour for the country's burgeoning construction and engineering industries. The former group is solicited by the Singaporean government through the provision of educational scholarships and vocational training that oblige them to stay to work in Singapore thereafter, the aim being for them to become either long-term residents or citizens. The latter group, on the other hand, is treated in more transactional and transitional terms. They are indentured to their employers for the duration of their (typically one- or two-year) contract, after which they are expected to return to China. Despite such differences, and despite apparent commonalities with the majority Chinese Singaporean population, both groups are susceptible to various forms of socio-cultural marginalisation. According to Liu (2014, p. 1225), public discourses of Chinese immigrants in Singapore have perpetuated the idea that newcomers are socioculturally distinct from Chinese Singaporeans, and have fuelled "new identity politics that prioritize the nation above ethnicity". To help overcome this distinction, a National Integration Council was formed in 2009 to manage the transition of Chinese permanent residents to citizens. Although not exclusively focussed on Chinese migrants, such measures are an indication of the problem of managing difference in contemporary Singapore. This problem was explained by a Chinese Singaporean bible-study facilitator, who claimed that there is a deeper, embedded kind of racism [in Singapore] . . . There is this, kind of, systemic categorisation of people, whether intentionally or unconsciously, categorising people whether they are superior or inferior to you. So, unfortunately, the Chinese [migrant community] falls under the less superior [category]. In response to such categorisations (and, indeed, migrants' own counter-categorisations of Chinese Singaporeans), Chinese migrants tend to form relatively self-contained communities that exist alongside, but often in a state of tension with, Singaporean society. Selfcontainment is reproduced within churches, as Chinese migrants tend to have their own services that are spatially and temporally distinct from those of their Chinese Singaporean counterparts (Gomes & Tan, 2015; Kong & Woods, 2019). Not only are they distinct from mainstream Singaporean society, but so too are they distinct from each other as migrant ASIAN STUDIES REVIEW 7 groups; Chinese professionals and Chinese migrant workers rarely intermix, including within the church. As such, the church primarily enables integration into a peer-based community of migrants, with some limited exposure to Singaporean Christians as well. Despite such tensions, ethnic commonalities, combined with the legacy of religious persecution in China, render both groups a focus of the outreach activities of Singapore-based churches. Many churches have dedicated Chinese migrant ministries, which focus on evangelising students and migrant workers in particular. Accordingly, Chinese conversion to Christianity reflects and often reinforces the "ethnic exclusivity and society parallelism that is already in place" (Wong & Levitt, 2014, p. 356) in Singapore. The empirical data that follow explore in more detail the process of religious seekership among these two groups of Chinese migrants in Singapore. The data are presented as dialectical pairings – of freedom and control, giving and receiving, questioning and authority, and community and identity – that provide a framework for understanding the negotiations involved in converting to Christianity.

These negotiations stem from migrants' interactions with both home and host societies, and help to shape the experience of Christianity in Singapore. While these dialectics can be observed to varying degrees in other contexts (and among other migrant groups), they are arguably more clearly observed among Chinese migrants in Singapore, given the contextual specificities of the Singapore case outlined above.

Dialectics of freedom and control

Our interviewees were unanimous in their depictions of China as a country of control, and Singapore as one of relative freedom. While some commented on the specific limitations of religious seekership in China, others spoke in a more general sense about how being liberated from the controlling influence of their parents and broader social environment was a form of freedom. In the first instance, some spoke about extricating themselves from the control of the Chinese government – "after I came to Singapore, right, it's kind of like a relief, no government, I can do whatever I want!" (Chinese migrant, research scientist). Others were more specific about how leaving China enabled them to cultivate a (sometimes latent) interest in religion as "in China, most of the materials including books and papers related to the religion things is prohibited" (Chinese migrant, postgraduate student). In the second instance, the newly found independence associated with moving to Singapore – and the corresponding release from the controlling influence of parents and peers – enabled migrants to explore religion on their own terms. A male convert to Christianity recounted how his mother conditioned him to avoid Christians when he was living in China: All these years, my mum took care of my brother and me, so I feel like she is a bit controlling. Actually, when I was at a very young age, I saw some of my classmates wearing the cross. My mum always warned me, saying, "you stay away from them [Christians]" ... But she didn't tell me why. So, I just have an impression that I should not get too close to those people wearing crosses. For many, the act of conversion was viewed as an affront to the prevailing influence of their parents. The same convert recalled how, even now, "I feel that they still want to control my life" despite his efforts to "persuade them to say that it's my freedom to choose my belief". Converts therefore had to negotiate the ongoing tension between the controlling (albeit diminished) influence of parents in China and the relative freedom of Singapore, a tension that can be aggravated by the aggressive strategies of outreach pursued by many Singapore-based Christian groups. Chinese migrants who come to Singapore on educational scholarships are subject to well-organised, immediate and often sustained programs of induction by Christian groups. One postgraduate student in her early 30s commented on how I think that there is some kind of an official arrangement from the MOE [Ministry of Education], they actually collaborated with the City Harvest Church . . . they actually brought us to walk around Singapore . . . there was some preaching, but at that time I was not very clear about what was going on.4 She went on to claim that MOE arranged local host families to aid Chinese students' integration into Singapore, with this student being paired with a Christian family. Other Chinese students (i.e. non-scholarship holders) who moved to Singapore to further their education would be approached by Singaporean Chinese Christian "befrienders" when they were studying in their student hostels. A postgraduate student from a different university explained how he was approached: They also live on our university campus, and they got the assignment to knock on the doors of the apartments . . . They knocked on my door and they found me. They gave me their contact information, and if I am interested, I can join them. And they will call you, to ask whether you have the time to go to the church, to see the church. Or they will arrange some activities to ask whether you want to join them. Examples like this were common, and in some instances, actually involved non-students evangelising within student residences. For many migrants, such overt gestures of friendship and introductions to a new, Singapore-based community were rare, and thus positively received. Through these practices, we can begin to see how shared ethnicity provides a point of connection and identification from which processes of religious

influencing can begin. Shared ethnicity can, in this sense, be seen as both a point of justification for Singaporean Christians to approach Chinese migrants, and a point of connection that enables Chinese migrants to cope with the sense of isolation that many felt upon moving to Singapore. As one Chinese migrant put it: "when I came to Singapore, I attended the church [activities] because I was very lonely and I was alone in Singapore". The example above reveals how religion is introduced to newly "freed" Chinese migrants within their own private spaces – their bedrooms – serving to create a clear and positive connection between Christianity in/and Singapore. Such connections would lay the foundations from which Chinese migrants could be socialised into communities of Chinese Christians (although these were often likely to be migrant communities). That said, while this example reveals how Christianity is brought to Chinese university students, other students were specifically targeted to be brought to a place of Christianity. For example, a nurse who came to Singapore to complete her nursing qualification recalled how she, and her classmates from China, were, to their surprise, approached by a Christian group at their private residence almost immediately after they arrived in Singapore: ASIAN STUDIES REVIEW 9 I think it's the second day, or the third day when we came here, then there is a bus will pick us to the church, the big church, I forget the name already. How do they know . . . ? How do they know where we stay, right? We also don't know! . . . So, in the church they will assign the mentor, so [then] we will know that they are Christians . . . Some of our seniors will also do some sharing . . . share about how they adapt [to] the life here . . . and they also share about something about Christianity, because they are in the church, then after that they assign the mentor to us. This excerpt reveals various insights into the dialectic of freedom and control. It shows the immediacy with which Chinese students are targeted (on their second or third day in Singapore), the unexpected surprise of such targeting ("We also don't know!"), the organised nature of outreach (a bus came to collect them), and, perhaps most importantly, the substitution of different forms of control (without asking for it, they were brought to the church, assigned mentors, and introduced to Christianity). In both cases, therefore, the freedom of Singapore is soon replaced by the controlling influence of Christian friendship and organisation. This replacement was recognised by a research scientist, who recalled how "initially I thought Christianity is very restrictive . . . I think all the atheists from China will have the same feeling as me, to say 'why does the church want to take control of my life?'". While the substitution of control was often subtle to the point that it went unrecognised, processes of substitution were often mediated by the giving and receiving of gifts.

Dialectics of giving and receiving

In many contexts around the world, Christian outreach is predicated on the distribution of "gifts" that can range from food to housing to spiritual healing. While the giving of gifts is often based on the claim of non-reciprocity, receiving a gift nonetheless draws the recipient into a space of engagement from which various forms of influencing can begin (Woods, 2012; 2018b). The dialectics of giving and receiving thus refers to the material and non-material exchanges of gifts between Chinese migrants and Christian organisations during (and after) the conversion process. While practices such as these are well documented in the literature (e.g. Akcapar, 2006; Ng, 2002; Wang & Yang, 2006), they are often treated in uncritically positive terms. In Singapore, however, the exchanges documented above often led to misunderstandings, which in turn gave rise to a politics of receivership. These politics were most noticeable among Chinese migrant workers. The Singaporean pastor of one independent church lamented how "reaching out to them, helping them to know about Jesus is not difficult, but to actually disciple them, disciple them to become a Christian that follows God is hard". Here the pastor admits the tension that exists between the giving and receiving of gifts, and the discipling of migrant workers. The founder of a Chinese migrant church (himself a Chinese migrant) explained how this tension was pronounced among migrant workers, for whom conversion was deemed unnecessary as "they have the old mindset – just know God!" This claimed difference in mindset – one that sees conversion as a

linear path from outreach to discipleship to identification as Christian; the other that sees outreach and identification as Christian as mutually exclusive and thus independent of one another – was problematic, and reveals the cultural disjuncture between the Chinese Singaporean and Chinese migrant communities. The Singaporean leader of a Chinese worker ministry explained this disjuncture in more detail: [They] think that this church, every week pay me $20 and I have good food, so I will go there . . . I told them [migrant workers] not to go to church like it's a shopping centre, it's very irresponsible. Like, you treat me well, then I come to your church. Or if I have good food, then you come to my church, I said that it's very bad! . . . You must show gratitude! Singapore doesn't owe you anything! The claimed "irresponsibility" of Chinese migrant workers in not receiving the gifts of the Chinese worker ministry in a way that was deemed acceptable was a cause of frustration for the pastor. Migrant workers are seen to view churches as "shopping centres", trading one off against another in terms of the benefits they can receive. Not only that, but the ministry leader also reveals how, far from being a non-reciprocal provision of charity, he expected the workers to "give thanks" – or to show a degree of loyalty to the ministry. The linear path to conversion anticipated here is that the giving of gifts leads to the development of ties with the church and, eventually, conversion to Christianity. However, such assumptions foreground a superficial degree of engagement with Chinese migrant workers, and unrealistic expectations of how they should behave in return. Ironically, the Singaporean pastor of the Chinese migrant worker ministry reflected this in his expectation that: We will supply them food and drinks . . . So that way, they will find [themselves] very loved, so they will see this as their second home. Besides China, Singapore is their home as well. So, when they have a sense of belonging, then every week they will come. Associating the provision of "food and drinks" with having "a sense of belonging" helps to explain some of the frustrations outlined above, but it also reveals the lack of meaningful engagement between different Chinese communities. Providing material goods can attract Chinese migrant workers, but not necessarily retain them. In some instances, the problem of retaining Chinese migrant workers was exacerbated when they came into contact with Chinese Singaporeans during church services. A Singaporean pastor explained how "they will usually sit behind, or quietly go off . . . [there] are some barriers, whether Singaporeans want to befriend them, or whether they can be accepted by Singaporeans". The perceptible lack of effort on behalf of Singaporean Christians to engage with – or even accept as Christian – the Chinese migrant workers reveals the extent of inter-Chinese divisions, and the insufficient attempts to overcome them. Those who did choose to seek a Christian community would do so on their own terms, worshipping in spatially distinct Chinese migrant worker communities that were separate from their Singaporean counterparts. The same Singaporean pastor explained how "they are used to the environment and they know who those people are, so I think it's more a sense of belonging [among migrant workers]". Gifts may, therefore, provide a strategy through which Chinese migrant workers can be engaged by Singaporeans, but their conversion to Christianity is often formalised through inclusion in a like-minded community of Chinese migrant workers. This helps to reveal the disjunctures between the gifting practices of Christian groups, and the general lack of community felt by Chinese migrants among Singaporean Christians. These disjunctures were reproduced in various ways among other Chinese ASIAN STUDIES REVIEW 11 migrant communities as well. For example, an undergraduate student recalled how she and other Chinese migrants were invited to attend a dinner and bible-study meeting at the home of a Singaporean, yet the meeting soon cleaved into two distinct groups – of Chinese migrants and of Chinese Singaporeans – that did not interact. Altogether, the dialectics of giving and receiving thus reveal how Christian outreach can attract Chinese migrants into a space of engagement, which can lead to conversion, to trading suppliers off against each other, or to rejection. While the first outcome accords with the linear pathway to conversion that Christian groups expect, the other two are more problematic outcomes that underpin the politics of receivership. Dialectics of questioning and authority Despite the relative freedoms associated with moving out of China, and the

tangible benefits that come from engaging with Christian groups, converting to Christianity is still a fraught process that involves converts having to reframe the world in which they live. Reframing can be a particularly challenging process for Chinese converts, as decades of atheist education and conditioning through the Chinese mass media mean that "most PRC students and scholars tend to despise religious believers and hold critical or indifferent sentiments toward religion" (Wang & Yang, 2006, p. 182). These sentiments posed a barrier to engagement for many Chinese migrants, as accepting the teachings of Christianity was foregrounded by the need to reject the authority of the Chinese government in promoting atheistic patterns of thought. However, they also foreground the negotiations that many Chinese converts to Christianity in Singapore experience throughout the conversion process. For example, a youth pastor from Taiwan recalled that "they [Chinese migrants] tend to be curious about it [Christianity] when they have the opportunity [to learn about it] . . . they have this Communist background and an atheist education, so I think all of them have questions". As a result of the "Communist background" and "atheist education", basic Christian precepts would often be questioned and accepted on terms that were, in many instances, different from those of Singaporean Christians. Indeed, these differences could result in antagonistic forms of engagement between Singaporean Christians and Chinese migrants. A Chinese postgraduate student talked about the problems she faced when trying to reconcile her shift in worldview with her previous beliefs, and with the beliefs of those around her: In China, the government does not like the religious things, and it requires all students to study Marxism . . . And after you turned to the Christian group, you face conflicts between Marxism and Christian[ity], and how you go over it [i.e. reconcile it], it's a little bit problematic. Reconciling these different points of view is a process that Cao (2005) describes as "reauthoritisation", wherein systems of socio-political authority in China must be replaced with new systems of authority that may complement or contrast with those that came before. This questioning approach to Christianity would often contrast with the experience of some Singaporeans who were born into Christian families, and thus had a more uncritical understanding of Christian teachings. Engagement between the two groups could be fraught, as another postgraduate student from China explained: A person who was born in a Christian family, and they will think that every verse in the Bible is right. No one will doubt any word that Jesus Christ said, but at first, when I first became Christian, I have so many questions . . . One time, I felt so offended that I just stand up and packed my bags . . . She [the Singaporean leader of the Bible presentation] was just shouting at me. Because, at that point, I remember we were discussing about evolution. Yeah, because I think humans were evolved from monkeys, and she felt really offended when I tried to say that, and she shouted at me "Don't mention the monkeys!" As shown here, the stark differences in mindset between Chinese migrants and Singaporean Christians could often become manifest through engagement. While engagement is necessary to paving the way for conversion, so too does it open up a space of dialogue that could result in debate, argument and offence. This questioning approach to religious seekership could result in Chinese migrants being seen not only as "offensive" (as is the case here), but also as intimidating to Singaporean Christians. A Singaporean male who facilitates biblestudy sessions on a university campus admitted that "the Chinese students . . . are more active actually than the local students". As a result, this created a situation whereby Singaporean students are "uncomfortable going to a [bible-study] meeting where you have all Chinese people . . . they kind of intimidated the locals when it comes to meetings", which, consequently, caused him to have to split the groups and have separate meetings for the Chinese and Singaporean students. This separation of Christian communities along the lines of different nationalities reveals not only the plurality of Chinese Christian identities that can exist side-by-side (see Ley, 2008), but also some of the more fundamental tensions that emerged between Chinese migrants and Singaporean Christians. These tensions often needed to be carefully managed to prevent them from becoming more deep-rooted fissures within the Christian community. Several of the Singaporean clergy and outreach workers who worked with Chinese

migrants we interviewed were both mindful, and wary, of this dynamic. For example, the Singaporean bible-study facilitator quoted above admitted that I try not to get into a debate [with Chinese students], because it's very argumentative when you're presenting yourself as a Christian, so you know when to back off . . . you just have to [say] "I am not going to argue with you". A Singaporean pastor agreed, saying that "we need to be careful . . . [Chinese migrants are] very highly demanding". Such stark ideological differences between Chinese migrant and Chinese Singaporean communities were often exacerbated by the transnational connections that Chinese migrants maintain with their friends and relatives in China, which could serve as barriers to the process of "re-authorisation" associated with conversion to Christianity. In turn, these differences often manifested as a dialectics of community and identity.

Dialectics of community and identity

Moving to Singapore forces Chinese migrants to reappraise their role in the communities to which they belong, while converting to Christianity involves a reconfiguration of identity. These processes of reappraisal and reconfiguration can lead to the fracturing of old relationships and the forging of new ones, and underpin the dialectics of community and identity. A postgraduate student in his 30s recalled how "I was surprised to see so ASIAN STUDIES REVIEW 13 many ethnic Chinese in Singapore are Christians", an observation that foregrounded the need for him to rethink the mutual exclusivity of "Chinese" and "Christian" identities. For many, the reconfiguration of identity involved (re)negotiating the role of Christianity in their lives, which in turn involved them becoming closer to some communities and more distant from others. For example, for one migrant who works in finance, moving to Singapore enabled her to more fully realise her Catholic identity. Baptised as a Catholic at a young age, the restrictive religious context and fears of social outcasting in China prevented her from using her baptismal name – Mary – until she moved to Singapore. Moving to Singapore thus enabled both a realisation of her Catholic self, and the forging of closer bonds with others, as "the name Mary is used by my church friends [in Singapore], so whenever they call me Mary, I think, it's like I have more common traits with them". That said, the vast majority of Chinese migrants convert to Christianity after arriving in Singapore. The process of conversion and the associated reconfiguring of identity often involved distancing themselves from other, non-Christian communities to which they once belonged. Distancing was often a function of the fact that Christian groups impart a sense of community onto migrants who may feel lost or dislocated from the communities to which they belonged in China. They also provide overt emotional support, despite the fact that "it is discouraged and even stigmatized to disclose personal emotion and experience to outsiders or non-family members" (Cao, 2005, p. 194) in China. The same sentiment was shared by a postgraduate student, who recalled the loneliness she felt upon arriving in Singapore, and how it was filled by a Christian outreach worker, referred to below as "nanny": I was here, and I cannot keep dialling my mother's phone and say I feel lonely . . . she can't help me, right? And I didn't know anybody in Singapore, I came here alone. And I really, really need someone to talk to me, and I want to, for example, I like to share something, I can't find anyone to share with me. But . . . the nanny who takes me to church, she is very considerate, and she will call me . . . and sometimes when she also comes to my university, she will take me out for dinner . . . I just want to be able to say something, to talk to someone, not [be] that lonely. That's my purpose to get baptised. Conversion to Christianity can enable acceptance into a new community and the cultivation of a sense of belonging ("that's my purpose to get baptised"). In this case, conversion brought about a more immediate sense of belonging that came from being embedded within a close-knit community of like-minded individuals. That said, once the immediate need for a sense of belonging was met, other, more nuanced problems associated with community identification could emerge. The postgraduate student cited above went on to explain why the initial relationship with "nanny" was soon replaced by a much deeper sense of attachment to a community

of Chinese Christian migrants, the reason being that: There is a gap between the, we call it church kid, the [Singaporean] children born into a Christian family . . . and we [Chinese migrants] are the converters . . . let's say the [Chinese] students come to the [Christian] gathering, I can't see any Singaporean students . . . They share something like different views between us, I think they might feel that we are less devoted to Christian[ity] . . . But we have our own background . . . we understand the Bible from different points of view . . . that makes a gap between us. In this sense, conversion to Christianity can be seen as a process of seeking a deep attachment to a specific (ethno-nationally defined) religious community. Put differently, it meant forging a sense of belonging with other Chinese Christian migrants, rather than with the broader Christian community in Singapore. Another postgraduate student admitted that converting to Christianity brought her into closer contact with Chinese Singaporeans, and the subsequent realisation that "even though the country is dominated by Chinese [people] . . . the culture is Western-style". Thus, while it has been suggested that "ethnic affinity with other Chinese is evidently not a major reason for their [Chinese] conversion to Christianity" (Wang & Yang, 2006, p. 190), we contend that national affinity can serve as a basis for the formation, strengthening and isolation of Chinese Christian migrant communities. There are many reasons for such isolation, most of which are reinforced by the antagonistic attitudes that different Chinese communities have towards each other. On the one hand, a Chinese Singaporean in her early 20s admitted that, despite sharing a common Christian faith, "we're xenophobic, I think, PRC-wise, we generally view them, the general view of Singaporeans . . . we resent them as a community". The resentment described here was interpreted by a middle-aged Chinese Singaporean in terms of: "I can't tell any more, I think right now, in Singapore, I can't tell who is Singaporean and who is not . . . We [Singaporeans] lost our identity, I feel, in terms of looks and appearances". These concerns regarding the loss of identity are only aggravated by the fact that Chinese migrants share similar "looks and appearances" to their Singaporean counterparts, and within the Chinese Christian community, the same religious identity as well. A common Christian identity can therefore be seen to exacerbate the dilution of the Chinese Singaporean community, and, paradoxically, can be a point of resentment rather than unity. On the other hand, Chinese migrants expressed little desire to integrate into the Chinese Singaporean community, irrespective of their intended length of stay in Singapore. A Chinese migrant in her mid-30s admitted that her husband took out Singaporean citizenship for strategic reasons (i.e. to secure public housing), yet they remain firmly embedded within the Chinese Christian migrant community. Echoing this sentiment, two Chinese postgraduate students admitted that Singapore was a stepping-stone to more desirable Western countries: one said that "if I can afford it, I will go to America, I won't stay in Singapore", and the other commented that"it [Singapore] is my last choice . . . I want to go to Australia". It is therefore clear that, for Chinese migrants, converting to Christianity is less likely to result in the integration of Chinese communities, and more likely to result in their distantiation. Finally, as much as conversion can cause Chinese migrants to become isolated from non-Christian Chinese migrants in Singapore, so too can it cause them to become estranged from their families and friends in China. Martin (2017, p. 712) highlights how an overseas education for Chinese students can be a "means for them to distance themselves from the pressures pushing them towards the standard life course". Conversion to Christianity can be seen as one form of "distancing" from the "standard life course", and could cause problems within the China-based communities to which they (once) belong(ed). Stories of family members objecting to conversion were common, with one convert in her 30s recalling how her parents warned her "don't be too Christian . . . just be normal . . . some Christian perform not like a normal person, like too crazy". While conversion to a religion can be seen to erode the Confucian underpinnings ASIAN STUDIES REVIEW 15 of Chinese society and culture, others faced problems when coming into contact with other religious communities in China. For example, a convert from a Buddhist family recalled how her father "say[s] Jesus is the foreign God, and says you go to your heaven and I go to my heaven . . . He just doesn't want two religions in one

family". Here, the divisions associated with conversion are to do with the rejection of the family religion in favour of a "foreign God". This notion of "foreign" religion being incompatible with "local" religion was revealed in a more nuanced way, when the Catholic migrant named Mary (introduced above) interacted with her Catholic friends in China: The university students in my Chinese church . . . It's kind of like I cannot relate to them . . . I always find myself a foreigner . . . I find it very lonely. It's the same feeling when I first came to Singapore, I felt like I am a foreigner. And now, when I am back in China, I am a foreigner. In this case, the experience of religion in Singapore – and the chance to more fully embrace her Catholic identity – was shown to contrast with Mary's experience of religion in China, and her subsequent ability to relate to her Catholic friends in China. Mary felt like a "foreigner" when she was with her Catholic friends in China, as her time in Singapore had enabled her to develop her religious self. Thus, her sense of "foreignness" evolved from being a Chinese migrant in Singapore, to being a different kind of Catholic when in China. Altogether, this shows how processes of Christian community-making in Singapore can create divisions not only between different communities within the same country, but also within the same community across different countries. Indeed, the lack of integration into broader Singaporean society can cause Chinese Christian migrants to occupy positions of "in-betweenness" that result in them having to negotiate multiple, overlapping and sometimes conflicting associations. Moreover, the gradual undoing of a Christian identity that was initially forged in China reveals the extent to which the Sinicisation of Christianity has expanded in recent years (Ng, 2002; Yang & Ebaugh, 2001; c.f. Lu & Gao, 2018). In this sense, as the categories of being "Chinese" and being "Christian" continue to merge, new forms of identity emerge, and with them, new types of community must be negotiated.

Conclusions

This article advances a new understanding of the ways in which the conversion of Chinese migrants to Christianity is a negotiated process that intersects with the formation and fracturing of communities in complex, and sometimes contradictory, ways. In this vein, it speaks to debates surrounding the ways in which "new" diasporic communities are integrated (or not) into host-country society (Liu, 2014), and how conversion to Christianity can simultaneously enable and disenable new types of Chinese communityformation. We have drawn attention to the fact that migrant integration is inherently problematic, as the communities that people choose to (dis)associate with can be weakened by the identity politics that stem from the presence and non-management of difference. Conversion within the context of"shared ethnicity" can bring the subtleties of these identity politics to the fore, and can highlight the problems of hyper-diversity in the contemporary world. In light of this, Singapore is an appropriate context in which such problems can be examined and understood, as it reveals how ethnic similarity can give way to deep-rooted differences and animosities between migrant and non-migrant communities. Chinese migrants converting to Christianity in Singapore both reflect and reveal the "convoluted web of intensifying contradictions" (Martin, 2017, p. 716) that stems from the fact that shared ethnicity and shared religion do not necessarily lead to a shared sense of belonging. As much as conversion to Christianity can, in theory at least, be a way to bridge differences, so too can it cause them to become more pronounced. In this sense, the Singaporean case highlights the need to develop more nuanced understandings of the shifting (and expanding) notion of what it means to be both "Chinese" and "Christian" in the contemporary world. It also draws attention to the role of Christian groups in (dis)enabling the integration of migrants into religious communities. This is particularly true in contexts such as Singapore, where shared ethnicities may catalyse more subtle and antagonistic forms of othering. In Singapore, Christian groups are imbued with the potential to play an active role in fostering more inclusive Christian communities, yet often they fail to do so. Rather than actively serving to mediate and overcome intra-ethnic differences, Christian groups would often allow them to be reproduced instead. For example, a Chinese Singaporean in her mid-20s admitted that

“sometimes they [Christian pastors] will make very, very generic and sweeping comments about PRCs, about China, or whatever”, which suggests that Christian leaders in Singapore may play an active role in causing antagonistic attitudes towards – and the divisions between – the different Chinese communities to persist. Accordingly, there is a need for greater alignment between the integrationist logics of the state and the practices of religious groups if a more cohesive Chinese community is to be forged. Without such alignment, Chinese migrant communities will continue to pursue integration – whether via Christianity or other means – on their own terms. While the territorial dislocation associated with migration invariably brings about a fracturing of the communities of origin, it can also create opportunities for newfound freedoms to be sought and embraced. These opportunities go beyond religious conversion, and entail the formation of new, more cosmopolitan Chinese communities that span inter-cultural and inter-generational differences. The problem is that while freedom can stem from fracture, fracture can also be an outcome of freedom. Negotiating these processes underpins the dialectics of religious seekership among Chinese migrants in Singapore, while understanding them can pave the way for more inclusive Chinese Christian communities in Singapore and beyond.